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"The liquor is not earthly": *The Tempest* and the Downfall of Native Americans

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In the realm of English literature, few characters have stirred up more international debate in a postcolonial world than a certain deformed, rebellious slave: Shakespeare's Caliban. As pointed out by Virginia Mason Vaughan, Caliban's relatively small yet vital role in Shakespeare's final play *The Tempest* has led to a myriad of responses portraying him as everything from a genetic missing link to a victim of colonialism (390). Yet, strangely, in all those pages penned in regard to this one conflicted creature, a certain pressing issue is not given serious attention: Caliban's exposure to alcohol in light of his

similarity to Native Americans. When drunken buffoons Stephano and Trinculo give Caliban his first taste of liquor in *The Tempest*, it is symbolic of the first time a European colonist gives alcohol to a Native American in the New World. Linking Caliban to Native Americans is nothing new, but the role of alcohol in this connection has yet to be sufficiently explored. While Caliban's drunken actions are somewhat exaggerated portrayals of what really happened in the Americas, this only highlights the negative role that alcohol has played in the Native American community. The interpretation of Caliban as a Native American thus reflects issues that these oppressed peoples, past and present, have experienced with alcohol.

The role of Caliban has taken on new life in the postcolonial world. As pointed out by noted postcolonial authority Edward Said, "[e]very subjugated community in Europe, Australia, Africa, Asia, and the Americas has played the sorely tried and oppressed Caliban to some outside master like Prospero" (214). Therefore, in addition to the Native American portrayal of Caliban, there are several other possibilities, such as Imtiaz Habib's depiction of Caliban as a "colonized black male" (208). This recalls the multiple black Caribbean interpretations of the play, including Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* and the work of George Lamming. Furthermore, Ania Loomba asserts that *The Tempest* "speaks to Mediterranean, North African, and Irish, as well as Atlantic contexts" (*Shakespeare* 165). These are valid arguments, but none of these critics addresses Caliban's exposure and reaction to alcohol, a topic that undeniably

links him with Native Americans more so than with other ethnic groups.

A wealth of scholarship already exists on the subject of Caliban as a representative of oppressed Native Americans, but why critics have chosen to underplay his encounter with alcohol is indeed perplexing. Allen Carey-Webb's approach to teaching *The Tempest* focuses a great deal on Caliban's conflicting roles, but he never once mentions his drunkenness, perhaps due to a reluctance to discuss the topic of alcohol in the classroom. Jeffrey Hantman's detailed accounts of the indigenous people of Virginia in relation to Caliban make no mention of spirits. Alcohol is touched on only in reference to the early stagings of Caliban as a "drunken beast" (71). Similarly, Virginia Mason Vaughan's article on the evolution of the character's onstage persona solely references a drunken Caliban in older productions that do not even take a colonial stance (392, 397-98). Alden T. Vaughan also surveys the extent of criticism relating Caliban to a Native American, yet he makes only one remark that the character is "the first drunken Indian in Western literature" (148). None of these critics delves deeply into Caliban's exposure and reaction to alcohol.

Tales of introducing alcohol to Native Americans were not uncommon in the travel literature of Shakespeare's day. New World natives filled the role of what Leslie Fiedler refers to as "the last stranger in Shakespeare," as they were the final Others to Europeans at the time (208).

Fiedler's overall assessment of Caliban as a Native American is complex and does actually address his introduction to alcohol, yet it still neglects to place the issue in its larger context. Fiedler cites Caliban's lines in the play, most of which are delivered after he has imbibed from Stephano's jug of wine, such as the drama's most eloquent speech about the "isle … full of noises" (3.2.137-45). Fiedler remarks that "[e]ven drunk, Caliban remains a poet and visionary," and he praises his intoxicated song about his new master, which concludes with the lines "Freedom, heyday! Heyday, freedom!" (2.2.184-85), as "Whitmanian" and "the first American poem" (236). Interestingly, Fiedler does not make a connection between the drunken Caliban and his Native American counterparts—a surprising omission. Similarly, in an article dedicated to the use of language in the play, Stanton Garner concedes that Caliban's drunkenness "serves only to loosen his tongue and make him bolder in suggestion," yet he does not associate Caliban with intoxicated Native Americans. He ends his commentary on the drunken scenes by merely noting their "comic atmosphere" (182). Obviously the alcohol does not make Caliban any less eloquent, as it does the drunken fools Stephano and Trinculo. At the same time, the fact remains that under the spell of liquor, Caliban can undoubtedly tell no lies, and he is more vulnerable than ever.

It is unknown whether Shakespeare had ever heard of any events involving drunken Native Americans, but in light of their status as the newest Others in the European

world, it is only natural to assume that Caliban's intoxication could very well be referencing what was then occurring across the Atlantic. Probably the first recorded occasion when a European gave strong liquor to an American would be the interaction in the late 1570s between Sir Francis Drake's crew and Patagonian natives in South America; this encounter is referenced in an essay by Charles Frey on *The Tempest*, using the details recorded in the journal of Drake's chaplain, Francis Fletcher (35). In this incident, a Patagonian "[g]iant" copies Europeans in the act of drinking wine, yet his unfamiliarity with the substance makes him quickly intoxicated and induces him to take "an instant liking" to the substance (Frey 36). This occurrence, seemingly innocent, laid the earliest groundwork for what later became a serious problem for Native Americans. As pointed out in the *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*, the indigenous people of eastern North America, like Caliban, had never encountered alcohol before Europeans came into the picture. Furthermore, like Caliban, these natives drank to the point of intoxication. In fact, observers marked that after having discovered the sensation of drunkenness, natives deliberately drank to complete insobriety every time on purpose (Mancall 14). In this sense, the alcohol-induced scenes with Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban are incredibly evocative of the very beginnings of alcohol exchange between Europeans and Native Americans.

Reading further into Caliban's rendezvous with Stephano's bottle, one discovers more parallels emerging that eerily replicate the scene in North America. Caliban's

instant drunkenness from only a few sips of Stephano's wine and subsequent irrational behavior reinforces the age-old "firewater myth," which claims that Native Americans are "constitutionally prone to develop an inordinate craving for liquor and to lose control over their behavior when they drink" (Leland 1). The only difference here is that Caliban does not actively choose to drink but rather is coerced into it. And although his intoxication does not come about due to his own volition, many of the reasons behind his enjoyment of insobriety reflect the motives behind the heavy drinking of Native Americans. Mia Conrad notes that first-hand accounts from missionaries relate how the average native believed that drunkenness helped him or her to acquire bravery and feel like a "person of importance" (par. 6). Very much like Caliban, natives were bombarded with feelings of fear and inadequacy due to infringement on their world by white colonists. Using alcohol to "cope with the horrors of the world," a phrase that could easily apply to Caliban's sad, enslaved existence, is actually characteristic of social change in Western society (*Deadly Medicine* 7-8). Although the natives of the Americas were not (successfully) enslaved, as is Caliban, feelings of utter desperation and insecurity were undoubtedly mutual.

Liquor's effect raises further similarities between Caliban and Native Americans in that both relate the substance to supernatural or religious beliefs. After only one swig of wine, Caliban immediately assumes Stephano is supernatural due to his "celestial liquor" (2.2.117). In the same scene, Stephano refers to his bottle as "the book" (the

Bible), in effect saying that drinking is his religion (2.2.129). Drawing connections between alcohol and the divine or spiritual is nothing new when discussing Native Americans, in light of liquor's ability to alter perception. As Peter C. Mancall notes, many tribes believed that alcohol has magical powers and that by drinking it they would come into closer contact with the spiritual world.

At the same time, the altered state brought on by drunkenness also made Native Americans feel emboldened, often to the point of violence (*Deadly Medicine* 75). Although he did not actually do anything destructive, Caliban plotted to have Stephano and Trinculo murder Prospero while he was drunk, revealing brutal tendencies unleashed through drinking. There exist many firsthand accounts of violence by drunken natives, even some in which the inebriated natives would have "the intention of killing those whom they bear ill will, yet all is then forgiven" (Conrad par. 6). This is exactly what happens in Caliban's case, since Prospero forgives him at the end despite his knowledge of Caliban's murderous plans. Thus, Prospero is carrying out the distinctly American practice of not holding drunken people guilty for their deviant behavior.

The impact of the white man on the excessive drinking of Native Americans and Caliban is indisputable. Natives adopted the aforementioned idea that inebriated people were not held responsible for their actions because they saw unruly white colonists do this, especially in the untamed West. Natives also pointed to the white man for their adoption of binge drinking (Levy 17). Caliban's

circumstances are almost identical to those of Native Americans in this way. The ever-tipsy Stephano and Trinculo, the only Europeans who ever show him kindness beyond the earlier attempts of Miranda and Prospero to "civilize" him, urge Caliban to drink as much as possible. This is apparent when Stephano, already fancying himself ruler of the isle, repeatedly demands, "Servant monster, drink to me" (3.2.3). The reasons behind the white drunkards' actions could be many: curiosity, humor, simple drunkenness, or quite possibly ridicule. The two could not be classified as anything other than alcoholics, or at least incredibly avid drinkers, as seen in their constant obsession with inebriation. Following the phases of alcohol addiction as outlined by E.M. Jellinek, alcoholics often drink with persons "far below [their] social level" in order to feel superior over their lowly drinking partners (qtd. in Leland 97). As rather low-class Europeans themselves, Stephano and Trinculo find Caliban to be the perfect accomplice since he is probably the only character on the island considered more base than they.

As time progressed in the Americas beyond Shakespeare's era, the fascination with alcohol that Caliban overcomes by the end of the play developed into a very serious problem for the Native American community. Of course, as Peter C. Mancall notes, Europeans did not continue indefinitely to give away liquor to natives, so by the last half of the seventeenth century an all-out trade in alcohol had begun in North America. Europeans now sold rum to natives for a very good profit, often watering down

the spirits. Because of this practice, alcoholism became a pervasive problem in Native American societies to the extent that Mancall can safely say, "No other European-produced commodity created the difficulties among Indians that alcohol, particularly rum and brandy, caused throughout the East" ("Alcoholism and Indians" 14). In contrast, while Caliban initially experiences the downfalls of excessive drinking, he later sobers up and realizes the error of his ways. He scolds himself for believing that Stephano was a god and tells Prospero that he will now "seek for grace" (5.1.299). In doing so, Caliban actually avoids the ruination caused by alcohol that has sadly plagued Native Americans in real life up to this day—surveys by the Indian Health Service indicate that Native Americans are still four times more likely to suffer from alcoholism than those of other races ("Health" 816).

Thus, while Caliban and Native Americans share many similarities while drunk, by the end of the play, the sober, enlightened Caliban successfully avoids the alcoholism that still haunts the Native American community. Although the reader has no way of knowing if Caliban regrets his drunken tomfoolery to the extent that he will never drink again, it is relatively safe to say that he has realized the downfalls of drinking and will not seek to repeat his mistakes. Still, why does Caliban not share the same fate as those experiencing forceful colonization overseas? One explanation could simply be that, as Allen Carey-Webb notes, "Caliban does not speak with an 'authentic' Native American voice" but rather "springs from a European

imagination at the very moment that European powers were invading the Americas" (31). Therefore, being a European fabrication himself, Caliban escapes the fate of real-life Native Americans because he does not share their disconnection from European society. Furthermore, as indicated by Imtiaz Habib, wholly linking Caliban and his island to a real place like North America is difficult because the "cultural constructions of the English experience of such locales are not interested in differentiating between their cultural and topographic specificities or are unable to do so" (223-24). Shakespeare could write only about what he knew, and while it seems apparent that he was somewhat aware that Europeans were introducing alcohol to Native Americans, it is impossible that he could have known the intimate details of the situation overseas, and there is no way he could have foreseen the problems to come that natives would experience with alcohol addiction.

Looking back on what sources were actually available to Shakespeare when he was writing *The Tempest*, it becomes clear why Caliban is portrayed so horrendously. Travel literature of the 16th century repeatedly portrays Native Americans as grotesque. Girolamo Benzoni's 1541 account of the New World, for example, describes indigenous people as "monstrous," and he remarks that "[a]ll their delight is drunkenness"—an early judgment that seems not to take into account the fact that natives never encountered alcohol before European colonists came along (qtd. in Loomba and Burton 93). George Abbot's *A briefe description of the whole worlde* (1599) also depicts natives

of the New World as sinful, freakish beings, committing "grievous sins" such as "adoration of devils, sodomy, incest, and all kind of adultery… which proceeded all from the fountain of ignorance wherewith Satan had blinded their eyes" (qtd. in Loomba and Burton 149). Such accounts were readily available to Shakespeare during his lifetime. Only after Shakespeare's death and into the 17th century did more understanding accounts of Native Americans emerge; commentators like William Wood and Roger Williams then argued that natives were healthy, normal human beings sharing the same lineage as Europeans (Brotton 230-32).

Also likely to have influenced Shakespeare was the common comparison between the Irish and Native Americans. Interestingly, Ania Loomba notes that "English attitudes in America were shaped by their experiences in Ireland," meaning that descriptions of the Irish were remarkably similar to that of Native Americans: "wild, thieving, lawless, blood-drinking, savage, barbarous, naked" (41). Clearly, Caliban was relegated to the unsavory position of Other that both Native Americans and the Irish securely occupied in the 16th century.

The Tempest is essentially a pre-colonial text now being read and analyzed in a post-colonial world. While conditions were changing in the Americas during Shakespeare's lifetime, these events no doubt seemed as far off and surreal as those encounters detailed in fantastical travel literature. For this reason, as Trevor R. Griffiths points out, even a respected newspaper like the *Financial Times* denounced an anti-imperialist production of *The*

Tempest, saying that "colonialism, the dominion of one race (as opposed to one nation) over another, is something that Shakespeare had never heard of" (qtd. in Loomba *Gender* 144). While I cannot wholly agree with this perspective, I do believe the most viable reason for Caliban's avoidance of Native American alcohol addiction is the fact that while Shakespeare may have had an inkling of future problems for natives in the New World, there is no way he could have foreseen the vast expansion of colonization and the amount of woe it would cause the usurped natives across the globe. In addition, today's readers are almost as distanced from the subject as Shakespeare himself was, since it occurred so long ago and is not a popular issue to discuss in American colonial history. The only indication that Shakespeare perhaps felt guilt for what was occurring in the Americas comes from Prospero toward the end, when he proclaims of the drunken, murderous Caliban: "This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (5.1.278-79). As suggested by Fiedler, it is "as if, through Prospero, all Europe were accepting responsibility for what was to remain forever malign in the America just then being created by conquest and enslavement" (249). This remains the only possible example of foresight in *The Tempest* concerning the woes of colonizing the New World, since ultimately Shakespeare could not fully realize or tackle the plight of a real-life Other, the Native American, nor could he ultimately do anything about his downfall.

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